



**North West Red Squirrel Group NIC. 107465  
Annual Report 1st January - 31st December 2023**

12 Millgrove Park  
Eglinton  
Derry/Londonderry  
BT47 3YU

**Constitution and Objectives**

The North West Red Squirrel group was set up and established in 2010 with the help of the Derry City Council and was constituted the following year in 2011. The group gained independence from the council in 2012 and has been operating independently since.

The objectives and aims of the group as stated in the group's constitution are:

The group is established:

- a. For charitable aims and purposes only, with the following objectives:
  - i. To raise awareness of the protected local red squirrel. Herein after referred to as the 'area of benefit'.
  - ii. To work with voluntary organisations, institutions, business and local residents, in a common effort, to protect and enhance the red squirrel population in the North West region of Northern Ireland and border areas.
  - iii. To control the grey squirrel, to prevent the spread of squirrel pox.

**Trustees and Committee Members**

The North West Red Squirrel Group had six trustees for the period that is being reported. They are Pam Hardeman, Christine Cassidy, Catherine Finlay, Andrea Mitchell, Aaron Murray and Theresa Kelly. Four of the trustees named above hold the positions of Chairperson (Aaron Murray), Vice-chairperson (Pam Hardeman), Secretary (Theresa Kelly) and Treasurer (Catherine Finlay). All the trustees named have had regard for the Charity Commission public benefit requirement statutory guidance.

## **Chairperson's report**

To the volunteers of the North West Red Squirrel Group,

As chairperson I would like to first thank everyone who is here in attendance at our AGM and to all members and volunteers of the group for all the work they have invested this past year. In our commitment to preserving and protecting red squirrel populations, your hard work and dedication to the cause has been invaluable. From organising awareness campaigns about the importance of our conservation work and in addition to the fund-raising events, your efforts have made a significant and important impact on the survival and preservation of the red squirrel in the North West. It is important for me to acknowledge the outstanding work of each volunteer who has dedicated their free time to engage with the public to highlight the importance of our conservation work and help raising money so that we can continue with our efforts.

Thank you for being the backbone of red squirrel conservation in the North West. I am immensely grateful for the time and effort you invest in making a lasting difference for our local red squirrel population.

Thank you and best regards

Aaron

## **Squirrel Update**

While there was no Ulster Wildlife Squirrel and Pine Marten Survey for 2023, volunteers still surveyed a number of woodlands throughout the year. To give an overview of the squirrel population in the North West we appear to have 2 areas with resident red squirrel populations, located in the Letterkenny Road and Eglinton areas (Muff Glen and Donnybrewer Forest). Most of our work focuses on the red squirrel population at Muff Glen, where we have supplementary feeding stations and cameras to monitor the red squirrels that visit the feeders. There was an extremely disappointing incident in the Mullenan area where trees were clear felled by the railway line at the start of the year. This area was considered a red squirrel stronghold area and reds had been surveyed there since 2015. We also surveyed a pine marten in this area in 2019 as part of the Ulster Wildlife Squirrel and Pine Marten surveys. Reds were still seen in the area a few weeks after the trees were removed, however a major part of their liveable habitat is no longer there. A camera and feeder were set up in the area in December for two weeks however no reds were surveyed.

While we appear to have stable red squirrel populations in Muff Glen and Donnybrewer forest, the population of red squirrels we had on the Cityside is under threat. In the past few years we have lost a few areas that contained red squirrel populations. The main reason for the loss of these populations has been habitat loss and destruction, along with the subsequent disturbance (Railway Line and City Cemetery / Southway). The other reason is replacement by grey squirrels, for example in Culmore. Unfortunately grey squirrel control

efforts were put on hold for health reasons in this particular area. As the grey squirrel population increased, they pushed red squirrels out of the area and replaced them. This should be used as an example that red and grey squirrels cannot coexist in the same area and that grey squirrel control remains important in red squirrel conservation.

Grey squirrels are more abundant in the North West following similar trends to previous years. Although grey squirrels have been observed in Muff Glen throughout the year, we believe that there is not a resident population in the forest. From the surveys volunteers conducted there are confirmed resident populations of grey squirrels in Ballykelly Forest, Gransha Woods, St Columbs Park, Prehen Woods, Culmore and Burntollet. It is unknown what the population change of the grey squirrel, however there was a slight increase in the number of grey squirrels dispatched by the group this year (230) compared to last year (207). The numbers dispatched the past two years are lower than 2019, 2020 and 2021 so this could show that the grey squirrel population is decreasing, however this is just going by the numbers of grey squirrels dispatched by group volunteers.

It has been a very positive year for pine marten in the North West. This year we surveyed pine marten in 3 separate areas. One of these areas was at Muff Glen in February. We think however that this pine marten was only passing through the area as it was only briefly seen camera and has not been observed since. During the summer we recorded 2 pine marten on camera at the same time. This was significant as it was the first time as a group we have seen more than 1 pine marten at a time. Based on the behaviour we think they were kits which is another major positive as it would indicate we have a breeding population of pine marten. During the summer, after reports from a member of the public that a red squirrel was seen in the Loughermore area, a camera and feeder were set up. Cameras and feeders have been set up in the Loughermore area for 5 months where pine marten visiting the feeder on a regular basis. A red squirrel was also surveyed here, confirming the reported sighting from the member of the public. The red squirrel however only visited the feeder for a few days and has not been seen since. There are a few possible reasons for this, it may have only been passing through and does not reside in the forest. Another possibility is that the red squirrel and pine marten were visiting the same feeder (albeit at different times). The red squirrel picked up on the marten's scent and changed its behaviour and stopped visiting the feeder. A third possibility is that the red was predated by the pine marten in the area. It is important to remember that the pine marten is a natural predator of the red squirrel. An interesting thing to point out is that during this time no grey squirrel has been on camera. This hopefully shows that the pine marten in the area are acting as a biological control against grey squirrels and helping to control their numbers.

### **Events and fundraising**

Below are a list of events and fundraising that the group held or attended

#### **Group Meetings:**

AGM 18th January - White Horse Hotel

1st March - White Horse Hotel

3rd May - White Horse Hotel

21st June - White Horse Hotel

6th September - White Horse Hotel

15th November - White Horse Hotel

**Litter Picks:**

4th March and 15th April at Muff Glen

20th May, 24th July and 23rd September Castle River, Mill Path Eglinton

**Meetings with other conservation organisations:**

Ulster Wildlife Visit to North West on 6th April

Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum Meeting 18th November - Edengrove Presbyterian Church, Ballynahinch.

**Events:**

The Gathering Eglinton Community Hall 24th February

Enagh Youth Forum 28th June Muff Glen

Pooches in the Park, Judges Road 16th July

Creggan Country Park 23rd August

Red Squirrel Awareness Week 7th October outside Millennium Forum

**Quiz Nights:**

3rd, 10th 17th and 24th October held at the Eglinton Cricket Clubhouse

Fundraising events like in previous years prove to be a major help in the operation of our group. With the money raised from these, especially the quiz nights, it helps us to buy things like equipment and food. In previous years we would often have a raffle to help raise money at events, however it would at times prove difficult to deliver the prizes to the winners. This year we decided to use a tombola instead of a raffle. This proved to be much more efficient than the raffle so we plan on continuing this for future events.

**Grants:**

**Benches**

Application with Live Here Love Here to have benches set up at Muff Glen. Unfortunately our application for the benches was rejected due to the Council withdrawing funding. We did however manage to get benches set up throughout the forest through the help of local Councillor Declan Norris and other sponsors. The sponsors were Claire at Green Cat Bakery, John Deery at MIM Engineering Co. and Bernard McGlinchey. Three benches with plaques showing who provided the funding were set up in Muff Glen and we have received very positive feedback from members of the public.

**Litter Picking Equipment**

After the major flooding events the NW experienced in 2017 lots of debris was washed down and collected at the far end of the river at Muff Glen. As a group we decided to apply for litter picking equipment with the Marine Litter Capital Grant, through Live Here Love Here. With this grant we purchased equipment such as waders, folding trolley, litter pickers. The idea was to clean up the river at Muff Glen and areas in Eglinton. We then organised a number of volunteer litter picking events initially at Muff Glen and subsequently at the Castle River.

These litter picking events proved to be successful not only due to the amount of rubbish lifted but also for the volunteering opportunities it provides so this is something we should continue to do in the future.

## **Cameras**

Live View Cameras:

Browning Recon Force Edge x 4

Browning Security Box x 4

More Browning cameras were ordered in to replace the ones that were malfunctioning. It is fair to say that we have not have the best of luck with the Browning cameras as we seem to be consistently having issues with them breaking down in one way or another. We have sent back several cameras under warranty. When we initially purchased Browning camera back in 2021 we thought that higher spec cameras would last longer than what we have experienced. We may have to look at other options trail cameras as the Browning cameras are becoming a bit too problematic.

## **Grey Squirrel Control Equipment From Trapman**

Squirrel Trap x6

Trap Dividers x4

Obtaining grey squirrel control equipment to replace older and/or misplaced traps

## **Complications & problems**

The major disappointment we had this year was the tree felling by the railway line in Mullenan. The area was owned by a local farmer and with the permission from NIEA cleared the conifer trees along the river. Although this was something out of our control it was very disappointing news when we heard about it. The area had a resident population of red squirrels. Something that may be beneficial would be surveying of this area to see if reds still present (a year on from clearance of trees). Another aspect would be potentially working with land owners in the area that have forest on their land.

Lack of cooperation with the city council, again, particularly in grey squirrel control is another issue we have faced. When attending the NI Squirrel Forum meeting in November, it was clear that the other NI squirrel groups were in active conservation and cooperation with their councils. We were told that under EU law it is the responsibility of Councils to control Invasive Alien Species (IAS) on council land, something that the Derry City and Strabane District Council avoid.

Another issue we encountered was footage at Muff Glen of a cat attacking a red squirrel in one of our feeders. In the weeks prior to this incident there were cats captured on camera. It is not unusual to have cats, foxes, dog or other potential predators show up on camera. It is not certain what happened to the red squirrel in this incident, from the photos captured it most likely preyed upon by the cat. We asked CCDNI to conduct a search of the area for a carcass, however nothing was detected. We brought this incident up with the other squirrel

groups at the NISF meeting and the consensus was that the feeder we were using was not ideal for red squirrels as they have limited escape options if a predator comes along. As a result we have made changes to the feeders we now use. Another incident we had at Muff Glen was an injury to one of our volunteers in November. While undertaking work in the forest the volunteer unfortunately slipped and resulted in a dislocated and broken ankle. Thankfully emergency services were able to be contacted and provide assistance. This incident meant that we have reviewed the risk assessment and safety measures we had in place at that time when members of the group are volunteering, especially when in areas of poor phone reception.

Unfortunately no red squirrels were surveyed in the Culmore area in 2023. It marks the first time since 2015 that no reds were observed either from trail cameras or visual surveys. The last red squirrel recorded on camera in this area was in April 2022. Unfortunately a break in the grey squirrel control efforts in the lead meant that the population increased and encroached into the areas the red squirrels were living and displaced them.

### **Future Outlook & Conclusion**

While there have been some setbacks this year the important thing to take away is that we still have red squirrel populations in the North West. When it comes to grey squirrel control perhaps a more targeted approach could be taken so that it focuses in areas that currently have red squirrels (e.g. Muff Glen, Letterkenny Road) or areas where reds have been surveyed previously (e.g. Culmore). This would allow us to concentrate more of these important interface areas and help with the efficiency of volunteering time.

The major positive from this year was the pine marten so this could be a potential focus for volunteers for the future. The fact we have a resident, breeding population is something we have hoped for to help in controlling the local grey squirrel population. Further surveying of the area would help give us more information on their range and potentially how many individuals we have as individual pine martens have different markings on their 'bibs'. Along with monitoring we could possibly set up nest boxes for the pine marten. The habitat the pine martens were surveyed in is not ideal for them as it was plantation forest. Setting up a nest box could help nursing mothers and kits and help survivability during the winter.

Depending on volunteer numbers and wishes we could be conducting more regular surveying of woodlands outside Muff Glen. This would give more volunteering opportunities for members and also provide with more information of what species are in which woodlands. An example being at Donnybrewer forest. We surveyed here in February and had nothing on camera. We decided to survey again later on in the year in late November/early December in which red squirrels were captured on camera. It raises the question should we be surveying areas a few times a year (so we are not just surveying 2 weeks out of the year). This year Ulster Wildlife will be conducting their Northern Ireland Squirrel and Pine Marten Surveys, so participating in this survey will be a major focus for us this coming year and help give more volunteering opportunities for our members and the public.

**Name:**

Aaron Murray

**Position:**

Chairperson

**Date:**

- 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024

**Signature:**

*Aaron Murray*